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A Spy in Britain For the Russians Given 35 Years

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LONDON, Nov. 10 — A British linguistics expert pleaded guilty today to charges of passing secrets to the Soviet Union on the activities of a classified electronics listening post.

The expert, Geoffrey Arthur Prime, 44 years old, was sentenced to 35 years in prison by Lord Lane, the Lord Chief Justice, who said that Mr. Prime's treason had caused "incalculable harm" to the security interests of Britain and its allies.

According to United States sources, British intelligence officials have determined that the case represented one of the most potentially damaging penetrations of Western intelligence since World War II.

Details of Case Excluded

"The legal phase of the case is over, but the assessment of the intelligence implications has really only just begun," said one American intelligence official.

Details on the information supplied by Mr. Prime to the Russians in the 14 years he was in their pay were not included in the brief outline of the case presented by the prosecution today. The Attorney General, Sir Michael Havers, said the defendant's activities involved materials "prejudicial to the national safety," but he made it a point to say that the spy passed along no materials that involved nuclear weapons or endangered the lives of allied agents.

He said the defendant had told British authorities that he first began spying for Moscow in 1968 while he was on duty with the Royal Air Force in West Berlin. He received money for turning over documents of a low-level security nature, like an R.A.F. telephone directory, and was schooled by Soviet agents in the tools of the spy trade, such as the use of microdots and secret radio transmissions.

But his real value to the Russians was apparently not fully realized until he left the military service, continued his education as a Russian-language expert and worked his way up in the British

civil service until he was assigned in 1976 to the Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham, the top-secret electronics listening post about 85 miles west of London. The post, jointly operated by Britain and the United States National Security Agency, with participation by Canada and Australia, is the nerve center for worldwide eavesdropping on the Russians and a major code-breaking center.

As a Russian translator there, Mr. Prime had access to information that could prove extremely useful to the Russians, particularly as to identification of the targets of American and British surveillance. In addition, by telling the Russians which of their codes were being broken by the computers at Cheltenham, Mr. Prime could alert them to the need to change codes or alter communications channels.

American officials also fear that he presented Moscow with the chance to feed the Cheltenham intelligence gatherers misleading data.

Commons Statement Expected

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was expected to make a statement to Parliament on the case Thursday and will be questioned by members on this latest breach of security in British intelligence-gathering operations.

A Labor Member of Parliament, Donald Anderson, said in the House of Commons today that the British public and the nation's allies were owed a full inquiry into the case.

"I have heard more from Washington about this than I have heard here," Mr. Anderson said today. "We were kept totally in the dark by an Establishment cover-up."

Mr. Prime's arrest and the discovery of the security breach were not the products of counterespionage work. His undoing came about because of his wife's conscience and during a routine investigation into a sex crime.

He left his Government post in 1977 after marrying for the second time — his first marriage ended in divorce in 1972 — and taking a job as a taxi driver in Cheltenham. In recent years, how-

ever, plagued by sexual inadequacy, he began molesting adolescent girls and came under police scrutiny this spring. He confessed his crimes to his wife, the court was told today, and also revealed to her his past spying for the Russians. She told the police and Mr. Prime, once in custody, confessed all. He pleaded guilty to the charges of molestation today and was sentenced to an extra three years in prison.

Came From Humble Origins

Unlike figures in British spy scandals of the cold war, men like Guy Burgess, E. A. R. (Kim) Philby or George Blake, Mr. Prime was not a product of a prominent family or exclusive school. He came from humble origins and went to a technical school, and both his parents had died by the time he was 21 years old.

His lawyer described him today as "desperately lonely, totally inadequate sexually and a social misfit." His original decision to sell information to the Russians was the consequence of the death of his parents and the loss of religious belief, the lawyer explained, and his search for something to believe in.

The court was asked by Mr. Prime's lawyer not to treat the confessed spy, who had not fled the country while he had a chance and who cooperated with the authorities, as a "ruthless and rationally motivated" individual. But before sentencing him today, the Lord Chief Justice said, "I am bound to say that is a description that fits you exactly." He added, "Your ruthlessness is demonstrated not only by what you did with this country's secrets but by what you did to those girls."